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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3471
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000819

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA
PARIS FOR JMILLER

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DISCOVERY OF HIZBALLAH ARMS CACHE, SOUTH LEBANON TENSIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a July 17 meeting, Defense Minister Elias Murr provided an account of the July 14 explosion in the south, saying that a small munitions warehouse, containing material stored by Hizballah since the July 2006 war, had caught on fire due to a cooking incident. He reported that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) responded immediately, and that UNIFIL arrived a few hours later. On July 18, UNIFIL Deputy Force Commander BG Kumar Bardalai and Chief of Staff Oliver de Bavinchove provided a different account to us, accusing the LAF of stalling UNIFIL to give time for Hizballah operatives to move unexploded ordinance to a different location. French and Italian UNIFIL peacekeepers encountered resistance from protesting local residents on July 18 as they attempted to continue their investigation. As of July 20, the situation is "quiet but tense," according to UN sources. End summary.

MURR OUTLINES WHY U.S. ASSISTANCE IS CRUCIAL FOR LAF

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and visiting Congressional Staff Members Paul Grove, Senate Appropriations Committee; Paul Rademacher, State Department Legislative Affairs; and Lauren Frese, Subcommittee for State and Foreign Affairs, met Defense Minister Elias Murr on July 17. Murr expressed his appreciation for United States' support in line with the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) five-year plan for training and equipment. Assistance from the United States has been critical in bolstering the LAF, Murr said, especially during the fighting in Nahr al-Barid in 2007. He commended the strong working relationship he and the LAF have with the USG.

¶3. (C) Warning that Hizballah's goal was to disrupt this cooperation and allow Iran to interfere in Lebanon, he stressed that the LAF still needed considerable U.S. assistance. He noted that he understood the Saudis would provide \$500 million to the LAF, saying Saudi financing could

reach \$1.5 billion after the cabinet is formed. He suggested this money be used to purchase American-made weapons. (Note: In a July 20 meeting with Ambassador, Saudi Ambassador Ali Awad Asseri noted that the KSA would continue to support the LAF but specified no amount. End note.)

¶ 14. (C) Grove underlined the need for the United States to follow through with its support for Lebanon, beyond the five-year plan. He commented positively on Murr's idea to use the financial assistance to purchase U.S.-manufactured equipment. Noting that the large budget deficit was forcing Congress to carefully examine its foreign assistance, Grove raised the idea that the GOL pursue a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the United States on out-year military assistance.

¶ 15. (C) Murr outlined several scenarios under which Hizballah would be weakened and the LAF called to duty. For example, he said, an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities could provoke Hizballah into launching rockets against Israel, and the LAF would need to respond. Alternatively, he conjectured that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon could issue arrest warrants for Hizballah officials, and the LAF could be tasked with executing the warrants. In these scenarios, he said, the LAF must be strong and prepared.

LAF RESPONSE TO EXPLOSION
IN HIZBALLAH'S WEAPONS CACHE

¶ 16. (C) Regarding the July 14 explosion in southern Lebanon, Murr said the location in question was a small warehouse containing a "small" collection of munitions, including approximately 12-14 Katyusha rockets. Murr assessed that the munitions had likely been stored prior to the July 2006 war, and were slated to be transferred to Baalbeck, out of the disarmament zone established by UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

¶ 17. (C) He believed that some individuals in the building were making coffee and started a gas fire, which set off the explosions. According to Murr, there were no casualties, though some individuals initially remained in the building at the outset of the fire. The LAF arrived within minutes because they were patrolling nearby, Murr recounted. He said the fire prevented the soldiers from entering the building immediately, and that there were onlookers, but no one interfered with the LAF.

¶ 18. (C) Murr added that UNIFIL troops heard the explosion and promptly called the LAF. Murr said the UNIFIL peacekeepers arrived on the scene a few hours later because they were not stationed in the vicinity. In a telephone conversation he had with UN SG Ban Ki Moon, Murr reported he relayed that he had condemned the incident as a violation of UNSCR 1701. Murr further reported that he had requested a joint LAF-UN investigation, leveraging UN forensic and technical expertise to determine precisely what was in the warehouse.

¶ 19. (C) While Murr downplayed the size and threat of the cache, he said he intended to use it as a card against Hizballah. He criticized the French UNIFIL contingent, believing they either ignored the building or were delinquent in not discovering the cache.

UNIFIL'S ACCOUNT

¶ 10. (C) On Saturday, July 18, the visiting delegation and PolOff met UNIFIL Deputy Force Commander BG Kumar Bardalai and Chief of Staff Colonel Olivier de Bavinchove at UNIFIL's headquarters in Naqoura. In contrast to Murr's account, Bardalai said the LAF had asked that UNIFIL not move immediately. He said a joint LAF-UNIFIL search team did not start until three hours after the explosion, and was then stalled for over an hour by local civilians.

¶11. (C) De Bavinchove displayed photos showing small arms/rifle ammunition, artillery rounds, 82mm mortars, uniforms, and cluster bombs. He added that his troops also discovered a fiber optic cable. He believed two Hizballah-affiliated persons were killed in the explosion and six were wounded.

¶12. (C) De Bavinchove was highly critical of the LAF, and accused the LAF of protecting Hizballah operatives while they tried to remove unexploded ordinance. Recounting how UNIFIL had cordoned off the area along with the LAF, he said his team observed Hizballah operatives moving unexploded ordinance to another building, but did not search the second site because of orders to "remain in surveillance mode." De Bavinchove called for a stronger UNIFIL mandate to search and seize weapons and also said UNIFIL needed required additional authorities and equipment.

UNIFIL PEACEKEEPERS INJURED BY
PROTESTORS WHILE INVESTIGATING

¶13. (SBU) Also on July 18, fourteen UNIFIL peacekeepers were lightly injured by protestors as they attempted to investigate a second site in Khirbet Selm. Approximately 100 residents gathered and threw stones at the troops while French peacekeepers, in conjunction with the LAF, tried to inspect a house two kilometers east of site of the July 14 explosion, where they believed Hizballah operatives ferried items after the explosion. Italian UNIFIL troops were called in when the situation became tense to extract the LAF and

French contingent, according to UN and diplomatic contacts.

¶14. (SBU) Col. Bardali told us that the UNIFIL investigators departed the scene of the initial explosion at approximately 1400 hours local time and that a few hours afterwards, two additional small explosions occurred in the area, lightly wounding one LAF soldier. As of July 20, UNIFIL troops are surveilling the second building and report that the LAF is also deployed (separately) in the vicinity. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams told the Ambassador on July 20 that the situation was now "quiet but tense."

¶15. (SBU) PM-designate Saad Hariri, speaking to the press on July 20, confirmed Lebanon's commitment to UNSCR 1701 and called for continued coordination between UNIFIL and the LAF. He stressed that UNIFIL's basic mission is securing Lebanon's sovereignty. He also rejected Israeli calls for amending UNIFIL's mandate.

TENSIONS LOWERED
IN KFAR SHOUBA

¶16. (C) Nader Hariri, advisor to Saad Hariri, told the Ambassador on July 20 that tensions were lower in Kfar Shouba, also in southern Lebanon, after Lebanese civilians had earlier protested the raising of Israeli flags and laying of concrete at its military outpost in the disputed territory the previous week. According to UNIFIL, an Amal MP led a protest on July 17 during which residents had cut the barbed wire laid by the Israeli army and were threatening further action. (Note: In June 2009, Israelis put up flags near the border in an area outside of UNSCR 1701's mandate. Though it was not considered a violation, UNIFIL troops approached the local Israeli commander, who agreed to remove the flags because they could become a provocation. On July 17, a truck deposited a cement base and the beginning foundations of a pre-fabricated water tower in the same area. End note.) UNIFIL sources told us it was the "first time in three years that the Israelis had built anything beyond the technical fence." Though the Israeli Commanding General said the tower/cement was an initiative of the local commander, UNIFIL sources doubted this after the flag-raising in June. According to Nader Hariri, Speaker Berri told Saad Hariri July 20 that he had met the mayor of Kfar Shouba, who said that the residents would not take any further action against

the post at this time.
SISON